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ABSTRACT

Developing substantial links between colleges and elementary, middle, and secondary schools to create a sensible, longitudinal process for developing writing skills can be mutually beneficial. Contacts with schools are easy to make. College composition teachers can contact high school teachers to bring their "college prep" classes for an open house at the college. Or, a composition teacher might offer to give a presentation about writing at an inservice meeting. School teachers differ from college professors in several ways, but are nevertheless experts in the classroom, and should be treated by college faculty as equals and colleagues. A college-sponsored seminar consisting of four half-day sessions can give teachers some theoretical background and a good deal of practical advice. In the first session, teachers are introduced to writing as a multi-step process, and to creating effective writing assignments. In the second session, they explore the reliability of grading criteria, while in the third session they discuss their writing activities during the previous weeks, and develop a holistic grading scale. The teachers discuss these grading scales in the fourth session, making sure the scales are incremental from grade to grade. (Information on obtaining a complete workbook for this course in included.) (HTH)

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ARTICULATION WITH SCHOOL TEACHERS ON WRITING:

DO'S AND DON'TS AND SUGGESTED PROGRAMS

by

Ulle E. Lewes

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ARTICULATION WITH SCHOOL TEACHERS ON WRITING: DO'S AND DON'TS AND SUGGESTED PROGRAMS

Three years ago the State of Ohio passed legislation mandating instruction in writing for all grades and competency testing in writing for grades 4, 7, and 9. Other states have passed similar statutes, and many more will do so. Hence an increased emphasis on teacher training in the area of writing seems inevitable. Needless to say, we as college composition teachers will be directly affected not only by the kinds of tests the schools will use to demonstrate writing competency, but even more by the kinds of writing programs they create to prepare their students. Those colleges that recruit many of their students from nearby geographical areas will readily recognize the practical benefits of working closely with the schools on this matter. But, in truth, it makes sense for all of us to develop substantial links with elementary, middle, and secondary schools in order to help them, and to have them help us, in creating a sensible longitudinal process for developing writing skills.

Initial contacts with schools are easy to make. You might contact a particular teacher and invite her to bring her "college prep" class for an Open House at your college. You might offer to give a presentation about writing on one of the teachers' traditional in-service days, like January 17th. Other possibilities include giving special programs for gifted children, creating a writing contest for area students, giving short talks to the PTA and school board, or setting up a joint meeting with area English teachers from the schools. At first, then, "articulation with schools" seems easy. But conducting workshops which actually change a school's pedagogy, curriculum, and the testing of writing requires much more than a charismatic

personality and knowledge of developments in the field. Such an endeavor requires some understanding of typical schoolteachers' fears, limitations, resistances, defenses, as well as special strengths.

I shall base most of the remarks that follow on the four years' work I have done with many school districts (and about 16 schools) in Central Ohio. I have worked with teachers of kindergarten (how to link drawing to writing) all the way to teachers of senior English. I hope you will find useful my suggestions of what to do and not to do when working with teachers to help their students write better.

You must remember that schoolteachers are different from college professors in many ways. Perhaps the most important difference has to do with education. Except for their age, schoolteachers resemble our senior undergraduates more than our colleagues. Of course they may have taken graduate courses, but they have essentially an undergraduate education--and their major was not always English. Although many have had courses in the teaching of reading, virtually none have had a course in the teaching of writing. Indeed, most schoolteachers have not had any writing course beyond freshman composition. They are certainly not aware of the advances that have occurred in the field of composition in the past dozen years. Often they themselves are insecure writers. For example, when I asked that a principal visit a workshop I was giving his teachers, he reportedly said to his interlocutor, "I'll come if you're sure she won't make me write." Such insecurity must be dealt with sensitively if you want to establish productive relationships with the teachers.

Another major difference between college professors and schoolteachers concerns curriculum. Unlike our colleagues in college, most schoolteachers have never really developed a course of their own. They are required to follow

"course of study" guides prescribed for a given grade level in their school district. Furthermore, they tend to follow pre-packaged "lesson plans" that accompany book series which are often foisted on entire school districts by book salesmen. This adherence to lesson plans and teachers' manuals may initially lead them to assert that they have no time to "fit in" writing. Some teachers especially protest that they cannot work with writing as a process because their pre-packaged lesson plans divide the marking periods into "grammar," "literature," and "creative writing." Such attachments to bizarre divisions must also be dealt with gently and gradually.

This brings me to a third difference between college faculty and schoolteachers. They resist having to take much work home. (This may explain why few give more than two or three writing assignments in a given marking period.) Furthermore, they will not do much outside reading. I found that even short, practical articles by experts like Donald Graves were not read, but had to be summarized by me at the beginning of the next workshop. Nevertheless, they consider themselves experts at what they do: in order to establish a productive relationship, one must work with them as equals and colleagues. Indeed, one has to "pay one's dues" to be accepted as their colleague. It helps if you have done some schoolteaching. If you have not done so, you might consider taking over some classes or grading some papers. For example, I chose to correct a set of papers from each teacher who participated in the program--one time that amounted to almost 2,000 papers!--but I could then use selected papers from their own students to teach them about process, reliability, and methods of evaluation. In any event, one must genuinely respect the fact that only the schoolteachers themselves can know what will work, what is feasible and what feels comfortable to them.

At this point we should remember some realistic constraints in working with schoolteachers. Although all of us complain about our busy schedules, we must surely stand in awe of people who work 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. with only 25 minutes for lunch and 5 minutes between classes. With an average class size of 30, they teach at least 150 students a day, every day, not to mention lunchroom duty, study-hall duty, and detention-room duty. (Why, they are so overworked that in one high school a well-meaning principal approved our request for a writing center, but, because of staffing problems, combined it with the detention room. Fortunately I did not have to protest the appalling association of writing with punishment; the teachers themselves brought about a change.) Given their full schedules, even finding a three-hour block of time for the writing workshops is difficult. Yet substitute-teacher time is expensive, and many teachers dislike after-school workshops even if graduate credit is arranged for the series. Therefore, I recommend planning with principals, curriculum coordinators, and chairpersons several months in advance so that such logistical problems can be overcome ahead of time.

* *

Having given an account of the matters one might be aware of when working with schoolteachers, let me briefly present a syllabus that could be adopted and adapted for teachers in your area.*

Session I:

1. Introduction to "Writing as a Process"
2. Creating Effective Writing Assignments
3. Experimental Grading of Selected Student Papers

Session II:

1. Effective Ways of Evaluating Writing
2. Considering the Learning-Disabled Student
3. Students' Cognitive Development
4. Group Grading of Selected Papers from Participants' Own Classes

*The entire workbook for this course is available from the author for $9 to cover the cost of duplicating and mailing.

Section III:

1. Using All Four Communication Skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing)
2. Using Writing Throughout the Curriculum
3. Reports on Writing Projects Undertaken by Workshop Participants

Session IV:

1. Developing Holistic Grading Scales to Measure Growth in Writing
2. Workshop on Scales for grades 9-12
3. Experimental Grading of Selected Student Essays, Using Holistic Scales

This prospectus of four half-day sessions gives teachers some theoretical background and a good deal of practical advice.

In the first session, teachers are introduced to writing as a multi-step process, something utterly new to even the younger teachers. Most teachers I have worked with are not only product-oriented, but even timed-product oriented: in-class, single-draft 30-minute essays based on "surprise questions" tended to be the rule. To begin to make them comfortable with such notions as group brainstorming, pre-writing, mini-conferencing, peer-evaluating, and multiple drafting, we devoted considerable time to evaluating and talking about a selected set of student papers. We discussed how these papers could have been improved if even some of the five tages I just mentioned had been used. We also discovered why marking all the surface errors was not helpful in showing someone how to improve his or her writing. We devised a priorities guide that encouraged teachers to evaluate content, structure, and development before moving on to grammar and mechanics.

The latter part of this first workshop was devoted to creating effective writing assignments. We dealt with "what to ask for and how to get it": in other words, we developed various kinds of instructions and models to follow. In addition, we worked at sequencing assignments in ascending order of complexity, and relating the earlier, simpler tasks to the subsequent ones

that were more complex. Teachers were also pleased with my three-page list of tips for using short writing exercises (ex: 5 min. "nutshelling" of the day's lesson) and for building revision into the entire writing component of a given marking period.

By the time of the second workshop, approximately 3 weeks later, I had evaluated one set of papers from every participant's classroom. We had agreed to use the same question, "Is It Ever All Right to Lie?" I chose this question because it would lend itself to analysis of not only writing ability but also cognitive complexity, which we know develops hand-in-hand with complexity in writing. In the workshop we evaluated student papers on the basis of an experimental six-point scale which I had provided. When the teachers found that they disagreed considerably on their grading, with some papers being given every grade from a "1" to a "6," they were ready for a lesson on the serious problems of reliability that occur if the graders have not established previously agreed-upon criteria. I summarized Paul Diedrich's advice on developing holistic grading scales (in his Measuring Growth in Writing) and the teachers chose to develop such scales for their grade-levels, to be used for pre- and post-testing each year as well as for conferences with pupils and their parents.

Incidentally, since I had included good, average and weak papers from each grade level, an added benefit was the destruction of the isolation in which all of us teachers work. The teachers saw, some for the first time, how writing does develop from grade to grade--how even the very weak papers become more complex. Unquestionably my most exhilarating learning experience from these workshops was seeing whole batches of student writing all the way from grades one through twelve! I believe this knowledge has helped me in my college composition classes in many ways.

In the latter part of this workshop we explored other methods of responding to writing, many of which the teachers had never used before: single trait scoring, positive evaluation, descriptive evaluation, peer review, and self-evaluation. I provided the teachers with 15 sample check-sheets to be used with various kinds of evaluation.

We began the third workshop with reports from all the workshop participants on what they had done to emphasize writing in the intervening weeks. Some had experimented with the multi-step process over a two-week period, others had emphasized collaborative learning (using the peers as brainstormers, advisors, or evaluators), still others had worked with journals, group projects, and new ways of evaluating papers. Since most people had brought along some sample materials, we were able to duplicate these and create a little "swap shop."

Before our fourth and final workshop, all teachers from the same grade level convened and developed rough drafts of "holistic grading scales" suitable for their grade level and for the course-of-study mandated by their school district. Most of our actual workshop time was consumed by group discussions amongst contiguous-grade teachers to make sure that their holistic scales were incremental from grade to grade. However, we did spend an hour trying out these roughly formulated new scales by correcting a series of papers I had selected from the original "Is It Ever All Right To Lie?" exercise just for this purpose. In all of the groups we achieved a consistency of 82% to 88%, something that truly thrilled the teachers since they still remembered vividly the disparities in grading we had encountered only six weeks earlier. Although much work remained to be done in order to make the scales truly consistent and incremental, these teachers had come a long way from their positions at the beginning of the workshops. They were trying new

approaches collaborating with their colleagues, and feeling "ownership" of the competency testing that they were developing.

In the years since my first workshops, one entire county and several school districts have adopted the holistic criteria the teachers developed for pre- and post-testing. Another gratifying result has been the significant amount of "teacher adoption" of principles, procedures and materials presented in the series of workshops. For example, the following were the responses from just one school district's teachers to the question, "Name one activity or procedure you have added this year to improv the writing of your students."

- Librarian established a bulletin board on main idea, support, and sequence
- Stressed reading comprehension
- Children made own books and read them to their classmates
- Wrote autobiographies
- Used more creative and experimental writing (6 teachers)
- Used story-starters and pictures to stimulate writing
- Daily journal-writing (3 teachers)
- Peer conferencing and evaluation
- Poetry booklets
- Open-ended free writing
- Developing a sequence of steps in writing assignments
- Used more compositions and short writing
- Started a Writing Center
- Held individual mini-conferences with students to discuss their writing

Those responses were made three years ago. Now this school district, the Jonathan Alder School District in Plain City, Ohio, can boast of being one of the first school systems in the state--and, indeed, the country--to have a comprehensive writing program with holistically evaluated writing samples from all students from grades 1 through 12.

Obviously it takes time and effort on everybody's part to improve writing in the schools, but if a small, rural district like Jonathan Alder can do it--and can prove its success with above-grade-level scores on national tests of reading and writing--then surely it's worth the effort.

UEW/gha